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## Crossing the hierarchies in organizations

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# **Crossing hierarchies in organizations: making sense of employee dissent and circumvention on internal social media**

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**Abstract:** This paper explores how and why visibility and persistence factors affect employee communication on internal social media (ISM) and influence organizational dissent. This study presents findings from a single case study conducted at a Danish bank. Discussions initiated by employees on ISM were studied for four months, and 24 employees were interviewed about their communication behavior and their perception of communication on ISM. The study found that employees would deliberately use the visibility of communication in the ISM arena to bring up issues that had been ignored by middle managers or support staff. Senior managers were perceived to watch the arena, influencing middle managers or other employees to respond. The efficacy of dissent therefore seemed to increase with the presence of ISM, especially when a post was perceived as well-formulated and an act of prosocial behavior. A new, unwritten rule, therefore, seemed to have emerged that dissent and even circumvention on ISM was acceptable when framed in a constructive manner and aired for the benefit of the organization.

**Keywords:** internal social media, employee voice, organizational dissent, circumvention, employee communication, enterprise social media

## **1. Introduction**

Organizations introduce internal social media (ISM) to increase knowledge sharing, engagement, and participatory communication (Leonardi, Huysman & Steinfield 2013; Madsen 2018; Miller 2016; Sievert & Scholz 2017). Inherent in managers' desires to involve employees is also the need to address possible dissent that can occur once employees begin communicating on ISM. According to Kassing (1997), involvement and participation are closely linked to dissent. When organizations involve employees, they indirectly ask them to reflect upon organizational practices and issues, and this is likely to develop into employees pointing out shortcomings in organizational practices and decisions.

Organizational dissent research explores when and how employees are likely to express dissatisfaction, such as when they experience a gap between actual and desirable practices in an organization (Kassing 1997). Most research on dissent has presupposed face-to-face communication, and Garner (2017; 2018) urges scholars to consider the medium of dissent, and especially the implications of social media on dissent events. In a study on the different types of media in internal communication, Welch (2012) found that media has an 'affect' as it creates an emotional reaction. Employees perceive different types of media in different ways, and some types of internal communication are more suitable for one type of media than others. ISM provides employees with an opportunity to start, comment on, and like a discussion. Therefore, employees might expect a dynamic and dialog-based communication on ISM similar to the communication they have experienced on external social media. Especially if the design of ISM resembles, for example, Facebook. In a similar line of thought, scholars have found that the visibility and persistence aspects of communication on ISM afford a different kind of internal communication (Rice et al. 2017; Treem & Leonardi 2012) which "may alter socialization, knowledge sharing and power processes in organizations" (Treem & Leonardi 2012: 143). The affordance perspective comes from information technology and looks at the relationship between users and the technology, it can "provide a useful framework to understand organizational media use and implication" (Rice et al. 2017: 107).

Employees dissenting on ISM are at the same time communicating to lateral and upward audiences (Liu et al. 2010), and in this respect the media offers a different kind of communication than email, which has been found to be used to express dissent with other coworkers while keeping

managers out of the loop (Hastings & Payne 2013). Email and ISM are comparable since the communication is electronic, persistent, and editable. However, ISM is visible to the whole organization while email is only visible to a selected audience. Therefore, the visibility of communication on ISM makes the media different from other types of internal media, and several scholars have studied the consequences of this communication visibility (Baptista & Galliers 2012; Leonardi 2014; Madsen 2018; Madsen & Verhoeven 2016; Van Osch, & Steinfield 2018). Discussions on ISM can develop into discussions about organizational values and ethics (Fägersten 2015; Madsen 2016) and influence an organization's norms (Uysal 2016); in this respect, ISM becomes part of socialization. However, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, little is known about how the visibility of communication on ISM influences organizational dissent, and whether this has any consequences for power processes in the organization when frontline employees can address issues directly to top managers. The paper will be based on a single case study at a Danish bank, and seeks to answer the following question:

**RQ:** How and why do employees express dissent on internal social media, and does their dissent circumvent the hierarchy in organizations?

## 2. Theoretical framework

Organizational dissent and employee involvement take into consideration activities and communication that connect the bottom with the top of the organizational hierarchy to ensure that information, knowledge, ideas, and opinions flow from frontline employees to senior management. In other words, the intention of such communication becomes to flatten or cross the organizational hierarchy. Internal social media makes it relatively easy to connect frontline employees with top managers, and therefore, the media has been perceived as particularly suitable for democratizing organizations (Heide 2015). In order to understand organizational dissent on ISM, a theoretical framework has been developed based on organizational dissent and the affordances of ISM.

### 2.1. Organizational dissent

Organizational dissent has been defined as delivering a message that expresses "disagreement or contradictory opinions about organizational practices, policies, and operations" (Kassing 1998: 183). The field is often traced back to Hirschmann's (1970) model of options available to dissatisfied employees, namely *exit*, *voice*, or *loyalty*. Different aspects of organizational dissent have been explored since then, such as dissent trigger events, dissent audiences, dissent strategies and tactics and how dissent develops when managers and other coworkers react to and interact with dissent as well as how dissent events can be traced to earlier dissent events and how they affect future events. These aspects of organizational dissent are presented in the following paragraphs.

Sprague and Ruud (1988) developed a typology of nine different dissent trigger events, namely employee treatment, organizational change, decision making, inefficiency, role/responsibility conflict, resources, ethics, performance evaluation, and preventing harm to self, coworkers, or customers. Kassing and Armstrong (2002) further suggested distinguishing between three types of topic focuses: self-interest, the interest of other coworkers, or neutral interest if the dissent concerned the entire organization. Then, they combined the typology of nine dissent-trigger events (Sprague & Ruud 1988) with their topic focuses and explored what type of dissent employees directed to whom. They departed from Kassing's (1997) model of dissent, and they distinguished between three different dissent audiences: upward dissent to supervisors and managers, lateral dissent to other coworkers, and displaced dissent expressed to someone outside the organization. Based on a questionnaire that was filled out by 336 employees from different organizations, they concluded that employees expressed dissent to all three audiences, but that they were more likely to express dissent to someone

outside the organization if the issue involved something that could endanger employees, coworkers, or customers, or if they felt pressured to engage in unethical behavior. Their conclusions aligned with previous research suggesting that employees expressed the same or similar concerns to upward and lateral audiences, and that how their dissent was received had a bigger influence on whether they would dissent than the dissent-triggering event. In other words, the organizational culture and leadership was decisive to whether an employee would dissent or not. The issue or the seriousness of the issue was less important than how the employees expected their dissent to be received. Disturbingly, employees apparently did not express dissent inside the organization, even regarding ethical issues that could be of great importance to the organization.

The literature on organizational dissent has also explored the employee considerations prior to deciding to express dissent. In particular, employees contemplate three factors: the possibilities for retaliation in terms of whether the dissent will be perceived as adversarial or constructive, the seriousness of the issue, and whether the employee believes that dissent will solve the issue (Garner 2018). On internal social media, these deliberations have also been explored in terms of self-censorship. In their study, Madsen and Verhoeven (2016) found that employees heavily consider four risks before they contribute on ISM. The primary risks employees took into consideration were: (1) risk of providing low-quality posts and comments, (2) risk of harming personal reputation, (3) risk of violating unwritten rules and norms, and (4) risk of comments and reactions from other coworkers and managers. These risks can also be reflected in the three factors described by Garner (2018). However, the four risks discussed by Madsen and Verhoeven (2016) are all linked to how the messages could be perceived by managers and other coworkers. Thus, the visibility of ISM seems to affect how employees decide to express dissent, suggesting that ISM affords a different kind of dissent than other internal communication channels such as face-to-face communication or email.

Organizational dissent does imply a risk to the person who expresses it, especially if it involves upward dissent (Kassing 1997), and therefore employees are very careful about how they present their dissent. Kassing (2002) thus identified five potential strategies for upward dissent: solution presentation, direct-factual appeals (an argument based on logic and facts), circumvention (going above a supervisor), repetition, and threatening to resign (Kassing 2007, 2009). Garner (2009) also explored dissent and identified tactics employees used in a single conversation. These tactics included the strategies mentioned by Kassing (2002), but also included tactics such as venting, humor, invoking the values of the organization, ingratiation, and coalition building; furthermore, several tactics could be used in a single conversation to strengthen the argument.

The strategy of circumvention is particularly interesting in relation to ISM since ISM provides a direct link between frontline employees and top managers. The strategy of circumvention is a face-threatening act, as it involves going around one's immediate supervisor (Kassing 2007). The strategy is especially used in response to supervisor inaction, supervisor performance, and supervisor indiscretion (e.g. harassment, abuses of policies, or unethical behavior) (Kassing 2009). Circumvention, therefore, often indicates a criticism of the supervisor and his and her actions, and the dissent can expose and threaten the supervisor's reputation. In this respect, circumvention violates the superior-subordinate relationship, and a supervisor is likely to assess the motive of the dissenter to determine whether it is self-interest, other-interest, or neutral interest (Kassing & Armstrong 2002). If an employee is dissenting to benefit the organization or other coworkers, circumvention could be perceived as constructive and an act of prosocial behavior (Kassing 2007). However, the dissent might also result in a deterioration of the relationship between the employee and the superior, and the employee might be fired or assigned to a lower position as a consequence of the dissent (Kassing 2007). Despite the possible negative outcomes for the employee, Kassing (2007) concludes that, overall, circumvention can be effective, appropriate, and beneficial for the dissenter, the superior-subordinate relationship, and the organization (Kassing 2007: 70). A positive outcome is more likely if the dissent is perceived as prosocial and constructive behavior (Kassing 2009).

Garner (2013, 2017) explored the dynamics at play in dissent. If nobody responds to an employee's dissent message, then little happens, so dissent is a process that happens in the interactions between the dissenter, other coworkers, and managers (Garner 2013). In this respect, dissent is actually co-constructed in the interactions between these parties. Garner (2017) also found that previous dissent events can influence a current dissent event in two ways. First, the perception of the dissenter as either a troublemaker or a problem-solver influences the perception of the dissent message. Second, an organization's previous reactions to dissent influence whether the dissenter and other coworkers perceive the organization as being receptive to criticism or whether they consider that it is futile to dissent. Dissent is thus a dynamic process dependent on the organizational culture that the dissent is uttered in, as well as how other organizational members interact with the dissent. Garner (2013) thus altered Kassing's (1998) definition of dissent. He argues that dissent is "an interactive process that occurs as a result of one or more subordinates expressing disagreement with policies, practices, or imperatives" (Garner 2013: 376). This process perspective on organizational dissent is especially interesting when it comes to organizational dissent on ISM. With continual conversations taking place on ISM, the organization has a record of previous dissent that can be found any time, and recalled word by word, both in terms of how people have previously dissented and how managers have reacted to this dissent. This leads to the next section in the theoretical framework about the affordances of ISM, and how communication visibility and persistence on ISM can possibly influence organizational dissent.

## 2.2. Internal social media

Internal social media has been defined as "a user-friendly and visible web-based communication arena inside an organization in which coworkers and managers can communicate, interact, connect, and make sense of their work and organizational life" (Madsen 2017: 3). The definition focuses on communication visibility, interaction among organizational members, and sensemaking. In the following sections, theories of the affordances of ISM are discussed, in addition to how these affordances can influence organizational dissent on ISM.

The affordance perspective looks at the relationship between users and technology (Rice et al. 2017). The affordances of ISM are the same throughout organizations. However, the perceptions of the affordances, and how the media influences a specific organization is different from one organization to another as well as from one employee to another. The perception of ISM depends on many different factors, such as how ISM was introduced, the organizational context in terms of leadership and culture, and how other coworkers perceive and use the media (Madsen 2017). Based on a literature review, Treem and Leonardi (2012) found that ISM has four affordances: visibility, editability, persistence, and association. These affordances have since been tested empirically and altered to visibility, editability, self-presentation, awareness, pervasiveness, and searchability (Rice et al. 2017). However, the most important of these affordances is visibility (Leonardi 2014; Treem & Leonardi 2012; Van Osch & Steinfield 2018), and that the communication stays online, a fact which is included in the affordances of persistence (Treem & Leonardi 2012), awareness, pervasiveness, and searchability (Rice et al. 2017). Instead of mentioning all the affordances, this paper simply refers to the affordances of visibility and persistence.

The visibility of ISM makes *people, communication, and interactions* visible to all members of an organization. This visibility exposes everything the employees do on ISM, and this knowledge makes the employees behave strategically in terms of what they decide to share and communicate (Madsen & Verhoeven 2016; Van Osch & Steinfield 2018). Van Osch and Steinfield (2018) found that employees segregated their audiences and directed representation activities to everyone in the organization, while directing coordination and information search activities to smaller, carefully selected groups. The first type of activity was meant to impress management and, therefore, the biggest possible audience was selected, while the two other activities were more task-related and

therefore more goal-oriented in terms of reaching the people that could help. Madsen and Verhoeven (2016) found that the employees behaved strategically in terms of considering whether their communication would promote or harm themselves as well as whether their communication could benefit the organization.

When the theories about organizational dissent are combined with the visibility of people, communication, and interactions on ISM, it becomes apparent that ISM provides an organizational arena wherein it is possible to present organizational dissent to upward and lateral audiences at the same time. Both organizational dissent and employee communication on ISM depend on the organizational context, such as management style and organizational culture, employees' relationships with supervisors and colleagues, and personal qualities and abilities (Kassing 1997; Madsen 2017; Madsen & Verhoeven 2016). Therefore, it can be theorized that the development of organizational dissent on ISM is contingent to the organization. In addition, it can be argued that the affordances of ISM can alter organizational dissent since it provides a direct link from frontline employees to top managers. Garner (2017, 2018) urges scholars to consider the medium of dissent, especially the implications of social media on dissent events. This paper is an answer to this call. Based on a single case study in a Danish bank, the paper explores how and why ISM influences organizational dissent and thus contributes to the understanding of dissent and circumvention in organizations.

### 3. Methodology

Case studies are appropriate when little research exists within a field and when the aim is to understand a phenomenon (Flyvbjerg 2006; Yin 2014). Therefore, a case study of organizational dissent on ISM at one of the largest banks in Denmark was conducted. The bank has approximately 4,000 employees at over 110 different locations, and it was selected as a critical case (Flyvbjerg 2006; Yin 2014) to study communication on ISM. The bank is known for having an open communication culture. In 2003, it introduced a discussion forum called "The Word is Free" (*Ordet er frit*), where all coworkers can start, comment on, or like a discussion. When one does so, a picture of the employee appears next to the post, together with his or her name, job title, and department/location. In this respect, both the communication and the person communicating are visible to the whole organization. For the study of organizational dissent, two types of empirical material were used: screen shots of four months of discussions in the "The Word is Free" forum, and interviews with 24 employees. In the following sections, the collection and analysis of the two types of empirical material are described in more depth, as well as a short description of two additional discussions that were added to the empirical material.

#### 3.1. The discussions

Discussions in the discussion forum "The Word is Free" were collected from September-November 2014 and in September 2015. Screen shots were made of 72 posts with a total of 522 comments and 3,443 likes during the two periods. These were downloaded and made into PDF files. A four-step netnographic approach (Bertilsson 2014; Kozinets 2010) was carried out to analyze the discussions. First, all 72 posts were read and divided into two groups. In the first group, there were 42 discussions that contained critical posts or comments that developed into further discussions with several comments and likes. In the second group, there were 30 discussions that were less relevant to the study of organizational dissent as they revolved around more social topics such as the price of beer at the Summer Party; these received few or no comments. In the second step, the 42 discussions in the first group were analyzed in more depth by looking at the issues that developed into discussions with many comments and/or likes. Four slightly overlapping types of critical posts and comments were found: (1) dissatisfaction with technology, (2) criticism of products, services, and workflows, (3) proposals for the organization, and (4) questions asked out of bewilderment or frustration. In the

third step, the job titles and departments/locations of the coworkers that initiated, commented on, or liked a post were studied. Employees from all levels of the hierarchy were found to initiate, comment on, or like the posts. However, not all employees were active. From the analysis of the employees' job titles, departments, and locations as well as their communication behavior, participants were selected for the 24 interviews (see the next section for further details). In the fourth step, the interactions between coworkers and between coworkers and managers were studied in a textual analysis of the 42 discussions.

### *3.2. The interviews*

Employees were purposely selected based on the netnographic analysis of the discussions in order to represent different types of employees in terms of job title and organizational position as well as different types of communication behavior ranging from almost passive to very active. The job titles included cashier (1), bank adviser (11), currency adviser (1), lower branch manager (1), branch manager (1), bank officer (1), specialist (2), analyst (1), senior consultant (1), business consultant (1), business manager (1), HR consultant (1), and marketing consultant (1). The locations included eight different branches and the head office. The communication behavior covered many different types of behavior from employees. Some were very active contributors and discussion initiators. Others mainly commented while others had only used the like function. A few interviewees were not active at all. A total of 17 employees were interviewed in December 2014 and January 2015 after the first three months of screen shots were analyzed. The remaining seven interviews took place in October and November 2015, after the screen shots from September 2015 were analyzed.

The interviews were semi-structured, and they followed an interview protocol comprised of three major sections. First, there were questions about the person's job, age, job seniority, and general activity on social media. Second, there were questions about their communication behavior, and their motives for this behavior. Finally, there were questions about their perceptions of communication on ISM, and how they perceived that the communication influenced the organization. This last section also included two critical incident questions (Downs & Adrian 2004) about successful and less successful examples of communication on ISM. These questions were asked to identify discussion events that the employee perceived as memorable, and therefore potentially had turned into stories of organizational dissent.

The interviews lasted approximately 1-1.5 hours each. They were transcribed, read several times, and then coded in NVivo using thematic coding (King 2012). The aim was to identify and describe the coworkers' communication behavior on ISM, their perception of organizational dissent, and the outcome of organizational dissent (see Table 1 for examples of thematic codes).

**Table 1: Examples of coding of communication behavior from the interviews**

Thematic code	Description of code	Examples of coded text from the interviews
The first post	Employees' motivation for writing their first post or starting a discussion	<p>"If I find it difficult to place a problem. Who knows something about this? Who can do something? Perhaps others have the same problem. Then it gets tested. You throw it up and find out if there is a problem" (Interview 3).</p> <p>"It is those situations where I feel I cannot get through the usual channels--that I am being pushed away at too low a level. Then by sharing it with a broader range of people... I find someone who is dealing with the same problem. That is where I think it becomes interesting. That is where things that are not working at [name of bank] come to the surface" (Interview 15).</p>
Comments	Employees' motivation for commenting or not commenting	"If I am involved in something, which the bank is not really paying attention to, and we have to participate anyway. Then I do not think it is worth spending our time on it" (Interview 11).
Political behavior	Considerations about whether to communicate depending on one's position in the organization or, relationships with superiors and colleagues	<p>"There are areas, which I am responsible for or my department, and in those situations you have to be careful. It could be a colleague's or one's area you express an opinion about. Then you are in a political situation where you might have an opinion, which is personal. However, because you have a specific job, then it is impractical or stupid to say something. Then I go to my manager or a colleague and tell them my opinion" (Interview 3).</p> <p>"It would be considered odd if I made a proposal. Due to my workplace, which is visible to people. I am not anonymous if I post, my job function is right there. So a lot of things I would have to ask permission, before I posted it" (Interview 10).</p>
Strategic use	Employees deliberately use ISM to raise some issues in order to change them or to make the organization aware of one's talents	"If I have to be honest, then it is more about thinking if I dare to say my opinion and hoping that someone might notice that I have. Not that I want to become a manager or something, but more because I want to do my job as well as possible" (Interview 3).
Etiquette	The unwritten rules about content, tone of voice, and correct language	<p>"You have to go for the ball and not the person. People are generally quite good at keeping a decent tone of voice" (Interview 11).</p> <p>"It is not the same language as on Facebook. It is not formal, where you do not say what you want, but you do have to consider your words a little. [The CEO] and our top manager can read it as well, so you do not just want to babble away about something you might regret later on because you got a little bit carried away" (Interview 12).</p>

### 3.3. Memorable discussions

During the interviews, several memorable discussions were mentioned. In the interviews in 2014, one such discussion was called "When will I be a bank adviser again?" from 2013. In 2015, a memorable thread was a discussion called "Is the catfish dead?" from March 2015. In the first discussion, a bank adviser criticized all the paperwork he had to do to satisfy new financial regulations, which did not leave him much time to do the job he had been employed to do. In the second discussion, a bank adviser challenged the notion that the bank was different from other banks. In 1982, one of the leading newspapers in Denmark had given the bank the nickname "the catfish" due to its untraditional way of running its operations. Since then, the bank has used the catfish as an organizational symbol to



signalize it being different from other banks. These two discussions were found and included in the empirical material, and they were analyzed as examples of dissent events that employees interacted with and that influenced the employees' perception of and the organizations' receptiveness to dissent.

#### 4. Findings

The analysis of the 42 discussions, the interviews with the 24 employees, and the two memorable threads revealed that the employees in the bank took advantage of the visibility and persistence of communication on ISM and the ability to dissent to lateral and upward audiences at the same time. In order to create a better understanding of how and why employees would use ISM to dissent, the findings from the analysis are presented in four sections: (1) dissent triggers; (2) coworkers' and managers' reactions to dissent; (3) employees' motivations for dissenting on ISM, and (4) employees' perception of organizational dissent on ISM. The first two sections draw on empirical material from the screenshots and the last two sections are based on the interviews with employees.

##### 4.1. Dissent triggers

The analysis of the 42 screenshots from the discussion forum identified four types of dissent triggers that developed when other coworkers commented on and liked a post. The four types of dissent gained between 2 to 51 comments and from 3 to 244 likes.

The first type of dissent trigger criticized technology challenges. In these instances, employees addressed the problem on ISM and highlighted consequences for the organization, such as losing customers, making employees less efficient, or making employees appear less professional in their work when talking to customers. The following example illustrates this type of dissent: "It doesn't seem professional that in a 60-minute meeting with a customer I have to spend 10-15 minutes trying to get access [to the system]" (Bank Adviser, September 2014, excerpt from a comment to a post with 7 comments and 85 likes).

The second type of dissent trigger dealt with employees who perceived products, services, or workflows in the organization to be contradictory to the goals of the organization or not appropriate when attempting to attract and retain customers. These posts expressed fears that the bank would lose customers if it did not change or improve the products, services, or workflows addressed in their comments. As stated by one of the contributors: "A whole queue waiting behind me heard that a [Name of the bank] credit card did not work" (Branch Manager, September 2015, 17 comments and 4 likes).

The third type of dissent trigger concerned employees who thought that the organization should act and communicate in connection with topics such as corporate social responsibility (CSR), advertising, employee satisfaction surveys, or supporting a cancer cause. An example of this type of dissent was:

[Name of the bank] operates using a value-based management system, and therefore, its focus has to be employee satisfaction. Therefore it puzzles me, that we do not undertake an employee satisfaction survey and ask about job satisfaction, interplay with management, motivation, roles and areas of responsibility, etc. (Bank Adviser, October 2014, 14 comments and 87 likes).

Finally, the last type of dissent trigger concerned employees who felt they needed an answer from the organization or people in charge in relation to the direction of the organization or the status of a specific issue, as illustrated in the following example: "Is it possible to get a statement from someone who is responsible for communicating what the plan is, and what is happening? One thing is having frustrations, another thing is not knowing what is happening internally [to solve the issue]" (Bank adviser, September, 2015, 10 comments, 91 likes). Another example was: "What are the thoughts

behind the decision that this is a strategic focus area? ....The best wishes from us in (name of the branch), hoping to get a little help to see the ‘sun’ – it usually has an effect on the result” (Bank adviser, 2 comments and 72 likes).

All four types of dissent triggers were generally presented to be in the interest of other coworkers or for the benefit of the organization. It may have been an issue that bothered the employee who expressed the dissent, but he or she formulated the dissent as if he or she spoke on behalf of a whole department or for the good of the organization. In this respect, self-interest or personal dissent seemed to be played down while the interests of other employees and more particularly the organization were emphasized. As such, personal dissent was only rarely shared on ISM.

#### *4.2. Coworkers’ and managers’ reactions to dissent*

When an employee expressed dissent in one of the 42 discussions or the two memorable events, the dissent developed in several ways. Either the dissent received few or no comments, or the dissent developed further through feedback (comments) from other employees. In the following paragraphs, four discussions are analyzed to explore the different ways organizational dissent was expressed and developed when other coworkers reacted to or interacted with the dissenting comments.

The first event to be analyzed is from September 2015. An employee was frustrated that the telephone system was not working as it should. The employee enumerated the consequences of this failure in his department. He explained how his unit had reported the mistake, but that new mistakes had appeared instead. He then asked for someone to clarify what was going to happen. The first coworker to respond suggested the employee give customers his cell phone number. The comment was supported by a smiley and a funny or ironic comment: “ultimate customer focus”. Another coworker, a bank adviser, then moved the discussion back on track by saying: “I think this is an extremely important topic that you are addressing”. Then, she moves on to give an in-depth explanation of how the issue also affects her department, and how it has not been solved despite good intentions from the IT-department. She then suggests that resources be allocated to quickly address the issue, and proposes using the previous telephone system and “rolling back” the new one until it is fixed. One of the senior managers then answers the thread by saying that he understands the frustrations, and that their full attention is on the problem. He then writes that even if he gets updates on the situation on a regular basis, he does not think that it is appropriate to provide separate status updates. He insists that they should ask their immediate supervisors. This answer then leads to seven other comments that support the initial dissent. Some comments simply report experiencing the same problems. A senior consultant from a branch then supplements their support with a comment that it is frustrating and unprofessional for this to keep happening, and a customer adviser then reports hearing rumors that changing to another system is being considered. This same adviser then asks, “will something be announced to us from someone who sits on the frontlines (IT-coordinators)?”. This discussion illustrates that the employees circumvented their supervisors when they perceived inefficiency with systems and processes or inaction from the organization. It also shows that they took this route when they perceived that their supervisors did not adequately address the issue or when dissent to their immediate supervisors and support staff had not helped. In this respect, they tried to circumvent the hierarchy and get an answer from the responsible manager. However, the manager in this thread did not acknowledge this circumvention and, instead, he referred the employees to their supervisors for future updates. In other words, he emphasized the value of the hierarchy.

Another illustrative thread shows how an employee dissenting on ISM could also receive mixed reactions from other coworkers. The following post was initiated by a bank adviser in September 2015. It was titled “New browser configuration – NOW!!!”. First, the post was supported by three coworkers who shared similar frustrations with the browser system. Then, a middle manager commented that he was sure that the people in charge of upgrades were aware of the problems with

the present browser. Furthermore, he lent his support to the unit being criticized by saying that he understood why that team was not in a hurry to answer the post considering the post's title. He wrote, "To me this is not honest communication". This debate then develops into a discussion between the initiator of the post and the critic. The initiator argues that people should be able to see the humor inherent in the title and that employees have an obligation to speak up and give constructive feedback. The critic then claims that employees have an obligation to speak up in a *polite way* and to be prepared to receive pushback. He wrote, "The Word is Free, and we can use it freely, but that doesn't mean it won't have consequences or topics won't be debated.... (or good advice given)". Then, a few more employees lend their support to expressing frustration with the browser. Two discussions were inherent in the thread: the initial frustration about the browser and a discussion about how to express dissent on ISM. The latter discussion implies that dissent should be formulated in a polite and constructive manner in order to gain attention from senior managers and support staff.

In a third example, a bank adviser directly addressed a senior manager by name. The post was in response to an item in the news section authored by the senior manager. The bank adviser suggested that in terms of providing loans to customers, things were not as black and white as the senior manager depicted them. Five bank advisers from different branches commented, supported, and developed the argument by adding their experiences. The senior manager who was addressed then wrapped up the discussion by thanking those who contributed for the comments before arguing his point and concluding that the bank had to make a difference by providing qualified advice, not by competing on prices and loan terms. This example shows that ISM is perceived as media where it is possible to directly challenge and question senior managers on their strategic decisions, and that the media can be used to strengthen the argument by allowing other employees to support and contribute to the dissent. The dissenter apparently did not get anything out of the dissent in the short term other than getting the manager to confirm and clarify the strategy of the organization.

The fourth example is a memorable exchange from March 2015, known at the bank as the "catfish-discussion". The discussion was found after the interviews since most of the coworkers interviewed in 2015 referred to the discussion as one that had an impact in and on the organization. The discussion started with a long and well-formulated post by a bank adviser who argued that it was hard to see how the bank was living up to its advertisement of being a different bank from its competitors. He explained, in length and by giving examples, the ways in which he did not find that the bank was delivering a difference to its customers. After that, he also criticized the bank's communication regarding its poor result in 2014. He claimed that the bank was trying to paint a rosier picture instead of just being honest about what went wrong in 2014. This post received 43 comments and 900 likes. The first eight comments supported the bank adviser. Some just wrote "agree" or "agree – well written", while a lower-middle manager from a different branch supported the spirit in the post and commented: "I hope it is not an impossible fight". Then, a top manager entered the scene and wrote:

Good and well-formulated post [name of initiator of the post]. This deserves a serious comment also here from the board of directors. 'We are working on the case' it says when you press a link here on the intranet. Actually, we are working on many initiatives and considerations in relation to your post, but the question is which one of them we will pursue. To find the answer to that is I guess called the 'strategy process' according to theory books. Management will return to the question in the near future, but until then, it would be nice to hear the opinions and viewpoints from the readers.

This encouragement worked. It sparked 30 comments that supported the initial post and added a bit more criticism by giving examples of other frustrations and suggestions for improvement. Then, another senior manager commented that while he did not agree with everything in the initial post, he

appreciated that the bank adviser wanted to act as a spokesperson on behalf of his coworkers. The post was then praised for being valuable and as inspiration to management: “I believe that your post is exactly what XX [two letters as an abbreviation for the CEOs name] has hoped for and will cherish”. Then, three more employees commented, and then one of the journalists from the communication department reported that the next issue of the monthly internal TV-program would be completely dedicated to the issue. The example showed that a well-formulated post supported by many coworkers forced the senior managers to react and perhaps even take action. Furthermore, in the interviews, it became apparent that the discussion had turned into an organizational story of dissent known as “the catfish-discussion”.

In all four discussions, the organizational dissent gained in importance or lost momentum when other employees interacted with the dissent and when dissent became recognized by top managers who reacted and responded to it. One of the posts directly addressed a senior manager, while three others did so indirectly. The communication on ISM was visible to all organizational members, and the support and interaction from other employees emphasized that the dissenter was not alone in his or her point of view. In the discussions on ISM, the employees mentioned the idea of power in numbers. For example: “At least my entire department [has that problem], and seemingly others too. But I think maybe the task [of solving the issue] will be rather extensive. Therefore, the thread here [was started] so that we can focus on how many people actually struggle with IE [an electronic registration] on a daily basis” (September, 2015). Other employees directly mentioned the affordance of visibility, as in the following example: “I choose to write here, as it is probably of a broader interest” (November, 2014). Thus, the affordances of ISM in terms of visibility and ability for everyone to interact with the original dissent became a co-construction of dissent, and it seemed that the idea of power in numbers and greater visibility of the topic seemed to persuade top managers to enter the scene. In this respect, it became a direct line of communication between frontline employees and top managers that cut across the hierarchies in the organization. This communication style was enhanced by the receptiveness of the managers. However, in one of the discussions where the tone of voice was less polite, there was no reaction from managers or responsible staff, which could indicate that in order to be taken seriously and have an effect, a dissent message should be formulated in a polite and constructive manner.

#### *4.3. Employee motivations for dissenting on internal social media*

In the interviews, the employees were asked about their motivations for dissenting on ISM, and it became clear that the affordances of visibility and persistence in terms of creating a digital record visible for everyone in the organization were strategically used when dissenting. Either because dissenters addressed the top managers directly or because other employees interacted with their dissent, the effectiveness of co-constructed dissent increased with notice. Top managers’ attention and/or the visibility of their dissent was seen as a way to force specialists or middle managers to do something about an issue. As one employee explained:

You might have tried to call IT security and the helpdesk, and nothing has happened for half a year. Then someone thinks: I will throw it up here, and then hopefully someone will react to it. Someone might reply that ‘It is you who has got a problem. It [the system] is not slow’ or you will find out that others experience the same problems, and then probably someone will pick it up. It is like a test balloon, someone can pick up (Interview 3).

This thought process was supported by another employee: “I think some people have a sense that more attention is given to an issue – also from the top— and there is no doubt that top managers keep

an eye on what is being written in ‘The Word is Free’” (Interview 2).

Circumvention of the hierarchy was also played out as a controlled circumvention. Several of the employees reported that they asked their supervisor what he or she thought of their post before they posted it (e.g. Interview 2). The reason for this could be twofold. First, it could be a way of ensuring that their dissent would not be perceived as disloyalty. As one employee said: “He gave me a green light” (Interview 2), meaning the dissent would not damage the relationship with the supervisor. Second, it could be a way of making the supervisor aware of one’s critical and constructive proposals, and thus promote one’s prosocial behavior of proposing something to be in the best interest of the organization. Posting on ISM as well as talking to a supervisor might also just be a way of getting noticed. A few of the people interviewed had been promoted after dissenting on ISM, and this dynamic was observed by employees in the interviews. For example, several interviewees mentioned that the employee who initiated a memorable discussion in 2013 was now the employee representative on the Board of the bank. In this respect, dissent on ISM could be perceived as a way of promoting oneself and taking a shortcut to a promotion. The employees’ motivations for dissenting on ISM were thus found to fit into one of two categories. They would either deliberately use the visibility of ISM as an avenue of self-promotion by displaying prosocial and constructive behavior, or to circumvent the hierarchy and get something done about an issue that they felt was being ignored due to supervisor or specialist inaction.

An analysis of the screenshots of the discussions on ISM showed that frontline employees were more critical in their comments of dissent than middle managers and specialists. This was supported in the interviews, where middle managers expressed that they had to balance the roles of being frustrated employees while acting in line with the policies directed from the top. This position made them more careful about how and when they communicated on ISM. The bank advisers, however, had less to risk and more to win. That may also have been a motivating factor for why supervisors supported the dissent of their subordinates.

#### *4.4. Employee perception of organizational dissent on internal social media*

In three of the four discussions analyzed above, as well as many other posts, it was found that dissent did not lead to a change. Nonetheless, in the interviews, the employees gave the impression that they did not find that dissent on ISM was futile. They noted that when senior managers addressed their concerns, they felt heard. As one employee expressed: “You get an explanation. It might not be a really cool one. But you can relate to it” (Interview 1). Some issues were out of the hands of the senior managers since the economic crisis had led to restrictions and demands of extensive documentation and the bank could not object to doing the documentation. Other issues were possible to change: “If it [dissent] is about the customers, then as a rule there is support, and you will get constructive feedback” (Interview 3). Employees who did not contribute to discussions also felt that the discussions were valuable since they provided insight into what was happening in the organization. It helped them make sense of the organization and organizational practices. Furthermore, the whole concept of frontline employees being able to discuss issues with senior managers in an arena visible to the whole organization left an impression: “It makes us feel equal. We can talk together regardless of where we are placed in the organization” (Interview 1).

## **5. Discussion**

The analysis found that ISM affected organizational dissent, and that coworkers deliberately used ISM to circumvent the hierarchy. In the following sections, how and why ISM changes organizational dissent is discussed by looking at dissent triggers, risks involved in dissent, and the outcome of circumvention.

### *5.1. Dissent triggers on internal social media*

Some of the dissent triggers on ISM at the bank were similar to the dissent triggers suggested by Sprague and Ruud (1988). Complaints about technology, products, services, and workflows could be perceived as dissent about inefficiency, resources, and decision making, while suggestions and the desire for answers from the organization revolved around ethics and organizational change. However, issues about employee treatment, role/responsibility conflict, and performance evaluation were apparently less openly discussed. The main difference between the dissent triggers found by Sprague and Ruud (1988) and the ones found in this case study is a matter of a distinction Kassing and Armstrong (2002) have made between self-interest, the interest of other coworkers, or neutral interest if the dissent concerned the entire organization. The issues raised by employees on ISM seemed mainly to be in the interest of customers or the organization. Even if it was in the interest of one person, it was framed and phrased as being in the interest of other coworkers or the whole organization. In this respect, it could be argued that the visibility of communication on ISM afforded dissent in the interest of the organization rather than personal dissent.

### *5.2. Risks involved in dissent*

Dissent on ISM addressed at the same time upward and lateral dissent audiences (Kassing 1997; Liu et al. 2010), and this affected the risks and outcomes involved in dissent. Fear of retaliation, seriousness of the issue, and the possible effectiveness of dissent have previously been found to be decisive in whether an employee decides to express dissent in an organization (Garner 2018). By uttering dissent on ISM, an employee could avoid retaliation from a supervisor since senior managers oversee ISM and therefore could recognize the dissent. On the other hand, employees exposed themselves to the criticism from other coworkers by placing their dissent on ISM. As shown in one of the discussions in the analysis, an employee was scorned for his way of phrasing his dissent, possibly affecting his personal reputation. On ISM, employees still feared retaliation, but perhaps more from other coworkers than their supervisors. Several of the employees interviewed had deliberately asked their supervisors for advice and approval before posting on ISM. However, the study did not get any insights into employees experiencing retaliation from their supervisors outside ISM. On the contrary, in the interviews, it seemed like well-formulated dissent was rewarded since something was done about the issue, the employees felt heard, or dissenters were promoted. However, this is something that is likely to be contingent on the organization, as senior managers' receptiveness to dissent is linked to organizational culture (Garner 2013). In this respect, ISM affords a different kind of organizational dissent that is likely to benefit an organization but will play out differently in every organizational setting.

### *5.3. The outcome of circumvention*

Employees at the bank used dissent on ISM to directly or indirectly catch the attention of senior managers. The perception that ISM was being overseen by senior managers made dissent on ISM recognized, and it also helped drive the resolution of issues that had been otherwise neglected by support staff or supervisors. Even when nothing could or would be done about an issue, the employees felt heard when their challenges were acknowledged. Thus, employees perceived that circumvention on ISM was effective. Employees were aware that circumventing their supervisors could influence these relationships and, therefore, many times they asked them for advice or asked them for a "green light" before posting their dissent on ISM. Many employees believed that constructive dissenters were rewarded within the organization either by being acknowledged by their peers or by being promoted. This supports earlier findings that employees use ISM to impress management (Van Osch & Steinfield 2018). Employees were found to make an effort to formulate their dissent so that it was either framed as being in the interest of the customers or the organization. In this respect, the employees were strategic in their use of ISM, a finding supported by other researchers (Madsen &

Verhoeven 2016; Van Osch & Steinfield 2018). These findings are in line with Kassing (2007), who concludes that circumvention can be effective, appropriate, and beneficial for the dissenter, the superior-subordinate relationship, and the organization. From the perspective of senior managers, it could be argued that communication on ISM was a way of getting an understanding of how decisions made at the top trickled down to frontline employees. In this respect, ISM could help keep middle managers and supervisors in line with the policies of the organization. Thus, the greatest advantage of communication and dissent on ISM, therefore, was found to be creating a listening and dialog arena for senior managers. It was a way of keeping senior managers in the loop as opposed to excluding them, as was found to be the case in research on dissent in email communication (Hastings and Payne 2013). Employee dissent on ISM, therefore, was found to cross the hierarchies of the organization and challenge the power of middle managers. The middle managers were in some cases asked to approve a post by an employee and, in such cases, it can be argued that it only looks like the middle managers were circumvented. However, it would be difficult for middle managers to openly disapprove of an employee dissenting on ISM when top managers so obviously approved of employee communication on ISM. Thus, asking middle managers for advice can be seen as a way for employees to make sure that they are not deteriorating their relationship with their supervisors by indirectly informing them about their dissent. Asking for advice or directly dissenting on ISM forced middle managers to listen to them more since the middle managers would not want to be exposed on ISM for not listening or stopping their employees from voicing their opinions.

## 6. Conclusion

The visibility and persistence of communication on internal social media seems to have afforded a new kind of employee communication at the bank that facilitates dialog and awareness of concerns between frontline employees and senior managers. This direct link or circumvention of hierarchy helped employees create a perception of the organization as having a flat hierarchy with approachable top managers who were there to serve their employees' needs as well as the interests of the organization. In some cases, ISM helped spur resolution of an issue or helped employees gain an understanding of why things were being done the way they were. The case study's findings were in line with previous research on dissent, indicating that polite and constructive dissent was most likely to receive attention from other employees and senior managers. In fact, a new, unwritten rule seemed to have emerged that dissent and even circumvention on ISM was acceptable when framed in a polite and constructive manner and as benefitting the organization. Senior managers' receptiveness to employee dissent on ISM was found to be crucial to the perceived effectiveness of dissent. Future research could explore how organizational dissent, particularly concerning circumvention, develops on ISM in a less open communication climate as well as how dissent on ISM affects middle managers.

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